

U.S. passport rule imperils tourism, Caribbean leaders say

Island officials oppose the U.S. plan to give Canada and Mexico an extra year before passports are needed.

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KINGSTON, Jamaica — New U.S. travel rules aimed at closing America's borders to terrorists may cause trouble for an unintended target: poor Caribbean countries seeking vital U.S. tourist dollars, regional officials say.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security this month announced new rules that mean Americans used to traveling to the islands with a drivers license or birth certificate will have to have passports — something many do not have.

"It's been so easy to travel here that this will definitely impede visitor flows," said Paul Pennicook, head of the state tourism board of Jamaica, where more than half of U.S. tourists enter without passports.

"The Americans may just ... go somewhere else," said Godfrey Dyer,

head of the Jamaica Hotel and Tourism Association.

U.S. visitors represent the region's largest tourism market, accounting for 53 percent of last year's almost 22 million visitors, excluding cruise-ship passengers, according to the Barbados-based Caribbean Tourism Organization. An estimated 60 million Americans have passports.

Under the new Homeland Security regulations, Americans returning from the Caribbean, Bermuda, Central and South America must show passports starting Dec. 31. But those returning from Canada and Mexico only have to show passports starting Dec. 31, 2006.

Caribbean officials stress they're not opposed to the border-tightening measures but say the extra year for Canada and Mexico gives their competitors an edge in attracting Americans without passports.

Earle Bethel, president of the Bahamas Hotel Association, said the earlier start date for the Caribbean will hurt visitor arrivals by discouraging "impulse travelers" who book last-minute trips and don't have passports.

"The implementation timetable

presents the industry ... with a huge challenge," Bethel said. "We're not against the measure in the least, but we'd like to be given the same time as Canada and Mexico."

To avoid losing ground, some tourism leaders are calling for intense lobbying to pressure the United States for more time to raise awareness about the passport requirement, which comes as the region continues to struggle to recover from a slowdown in travel after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Others are taking a more creative approach. The Jamaica-based resort chain SuperClubs announced it would cover the cost of getting passports — about \$100 each — in all-inclusive holidays booked for next year.

"We wanted to take away the hassle so people who want to come can," Vice President Zein Nakash said.

Concerns the measure might hinder cross-border commerce prompted President Bush to order a review of the plans, saying it must be more flexible.

The plans could include the use of unnamed "additional documents" still being considered, but the passport would remain "the document of

choice" for re-entry, according to a Homeland Security information sheet.

Some Caribbean countries, such as Barbados, already require passports from Americans.

A spokesman at the U.S. Embassy in Kingston doubted the plan would hurt travel to the Caribbean, famous for its white-sand beaches, lush vegetation and diverse culture.

"When people love a place, they will go there," Glenn Guimond said.

Several U.S. tourists agreed.

"Jamaica has its own unique charm and vacation value to attract her fair share of travelers," said Mark Bayer, 51, of Reading, Pa., who is planning to visit the island with his family in July. He and his wife have passports, but their three adult children don't.

Amber Peleska, 23, traveled to Montego Bay resort town without a passport for her honeymoon but called the requirement a good idea.

Meanwhile, Caribbean tourist spots that won't be affected are hoping to reap a windfall in new U.S. visitors.

"You don't need a passport to come here," said Alain Tiphaine, head of the hotel and tourism association in Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory.